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DEPT FOR EAP/MLS, EAP/PD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/09/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KPAO](#) [BM](#)
SUBJECT: BURMA REGIME ISSUES ANOTHER WARNING
TO AMERICAN CENTER

REF: A. RANGOON 314

[1](#)B. RANGOON 184

Classified By: DCM Karl Stoltz for Reason 1.4(b), (d)

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY: a senior Foreign Ministry official summoned DCM and Acting PAO to a meeting on July 9 to repeat previous GOB complaints about the activities of the American Center. Unlike previous meetings, which focused on specific events the American Center hosted, this time the GOB criticized the Embassy for offering scholarships to members of the opposition and for supporting a debate club and book club whose members engage in "political activities." Citing the Vienna Convention prohibition on interference in the internal affairs of other states, the MFA official warned that others in government were pushing for further steps and hinted that the GOB might review the number of visas granted to English teaching staff at the American Center. End summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) DCM and Acting PAO attended a meeting at MFA on July 9 at the request of Soe Win, Deputy Director-General of the Protocol Division. Soe Win began by recounting three previous MFA meetings about American Center activities (reftels). He read out a list of English courses offered at the American Center and said that some seemed "political in nature." Soe Win said that the GOB knows that former detainees and political activists participate in programs organized with the Embassy, including a book club and the Myanmar Debating Society (MDS). He said that the Embassy funded a trip to China by a former political prisoner now involved with MDS. Soe Win did not mention a recent June 28 incident at Rangoon Airport, when immigration authorities confiscated the passports and blocked the Embassy-assisted travel of five MDS members, including one Embassy FSN, en route to a student debate program in Italy. Although none of the students were affiliated with NLD or the 88 Generation Students, MDS now also seems to be on the regime's black list.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Soe Win charged the American Center with offering scholarships to members of the NLD and student groups based on those organizations' recommendations. Why, he asked, are opponents of the government being given special consideration by the AC? DCM rejected this allegation, saying our scholarships were awarded purely on merit.

[1](#)4. (SBU) Soe Win repeated that this was the fourth meeting this year about the American Center. He cited the Vienna Convention's prohibition on interference in

the internal affairs of other states, and reminded that, under Burmese law, advance government approval is needed for any educational programs or publications. DCM said the American Center was open to all Burmese.

15. (C) Setting down his notes, Soe Win recalled how he and his wife enjoyed reading books at the old USIS library in Rangoon, adding that the regime does not allow them to visit them now. He warned that other parts of the government were concerned about Center activities and were considering additional steps, but refused to specify what they might be. He hinted that the GOB was reviewing the number of staff at the Embassy, hinting that visas granted to educational attachés teaching at the American Center could be one means of retaliation. Soe Win concluded the meeting by expressing hope that this matter would not arise again, but warning that if it did, it would likely be brought up directly with the Chargé and could have more serious implications.

16. (C) COMMENT: The American Center bothers the regime because it offers everything the ruling generals try to deny their people: openness, free access to information, and a space for those of different ethnic, religious and political backgrounds to come together. Soe Win is basically friendly to the U.S.; others in the regime would likely take a much harsher stance. No doubt the timing of this warning has something to do with the reopening of the National Convention next week. The regime is clearly nervous about potential disruptions. With few venues for political activists to meet and discuss issues, the regime is monitoring American Center activities more closely than ever. End comment.

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